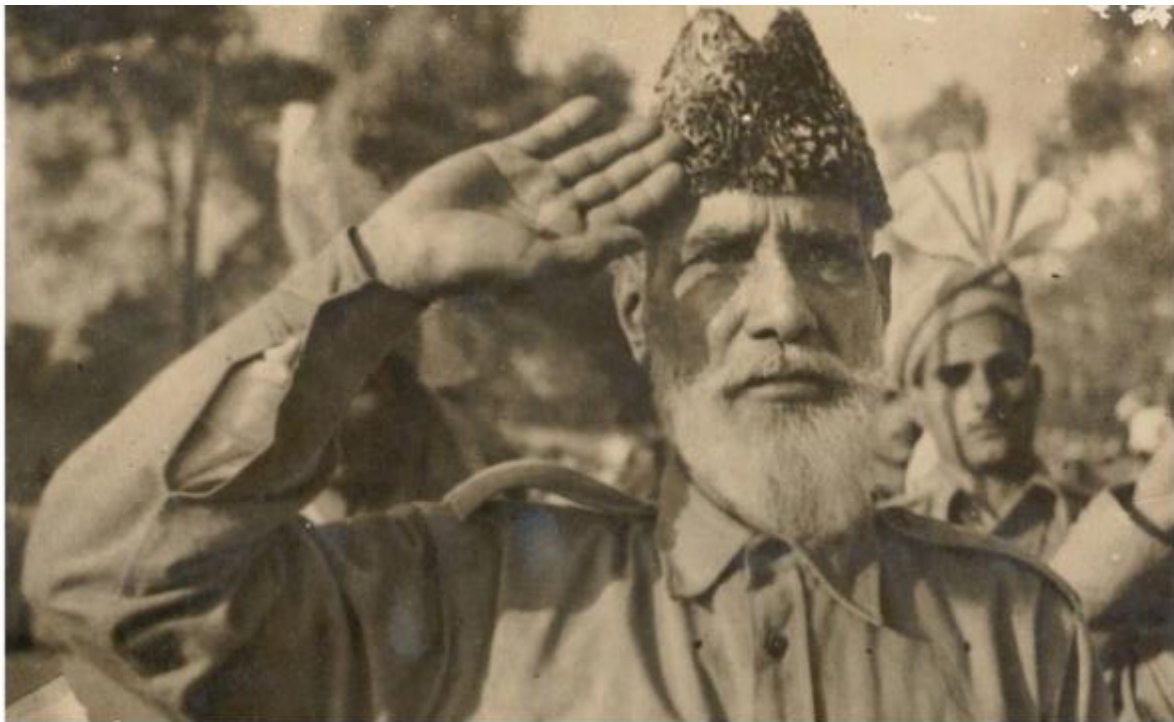


Allama Mashriqi: The Disowned Activist

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In the 1930s, India was a turbulent nation. The movement for independence was gaining ground, and many socio-political movements were taking shape. But **while the Khudai Khidmatgar led by Abdul Ghaffar Khan and the Dandi March led by Mahatma Gandhi received much attention, there was one movement that isn't talked about much.**

This was the Khaksar Movement founded in Lahore in 1931, by a Cambridge-educated mathematician and Islamic scholar, Inayatullah Khan Mashriqi.

Better known as 'Allama Mashriqi', he was born on 25th August 1888 into an educated, influential family in Amritsar, where his forefathers had held high government positions within the Mughal and Sikh empires. He received honours in mathematics, oriental sciences, mechanical sciences as well as natural sciences from Cambridge University, and, lauded in the UK's national newspapers as the first man with four different Triposes, an almost impossible feat to achieve.

During his stay abroad, Mashriqi also took interest in journalism and wrote in *Empire Views*, *Westminister Reviews* and *London Times* mainly about the Indian political scene. It was perhaps there that seeds were sown, which took him into active politics despite his study of a terse subject like mathematics.

Back in India, Mashriqi was appointed principal of Islamia College, Peshawar, at the age of 27!

In October 1917, he was appointed undersecretary to the Government of India in the Education Department as a successor to Sir George Anderson.

Interestingly, during this time, he wrote a book titled *Tazkirah*. A monumental religious-philosophical work, the book looked at the holy Quran from a scientific perspective. It drew tremendous interest from both the East and the West and almost won Mashriqi a Nobel Prize. For the nomination, he was asked to translate it into one of the European languages as Urdu was not a recognised language then, but he refused to do it. At age 32, he was offered the ambassadorship of Afghanistan, but he declined.

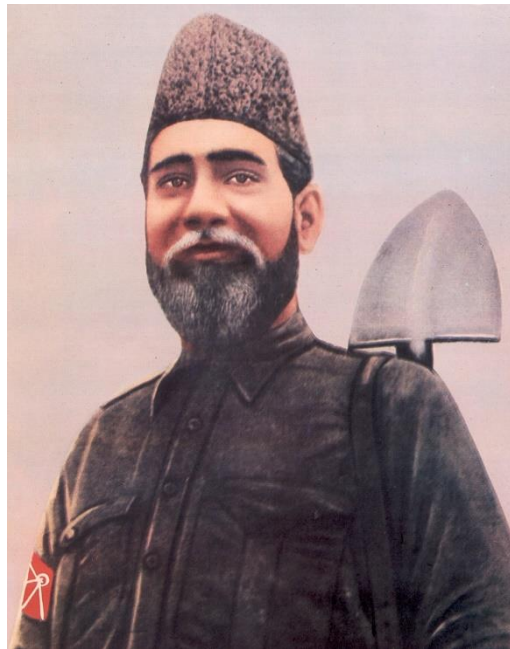


Khaksar Tehrik

Tazkirah was followed by another book titled Isharat, in which Mashriqi asked Muslims to follow the practice of ‘amal’, in which the symbolic spade or ‘belcha’ was used as a weapon just like the Prophet did when building the first mosque at Medina. This served as the foundation for the Khaksar Tehrik or the Khaksar Movement in 1931.

The name is a combination of Persian words ‘*khak*’ and ‘*sar*’, respectively, meaning ‘dust’ and ‘life’ –referring to the quality of humility. Initially, through this movement, Mashriqi aimed at advancing the condition of people of all faiths and particularly urged the followers of Islam to revisit the principles of self-reform and self-conduct.

To concentrate on this social movement, he resigned from his post in the Education Department, took his pension and settled down in Ichhra near Lahore. He started by recruiting followers to his cause from this village and publishing a weekly newspaper called *Al-Islah*. Reports suggest that he gained about 300 young members in a couple of weeks, which ran into millions in a span of 10 years.



Allama Mashriqi

In a pamphlet, *The Final Word*, Mashriqi wrote “*The introduction of the programme of humanitarian service in the Khaksar has been designed to make the Khaksars bold and fearless, to wear down his fat soul, to strengthen his obstinate and proud self and so to make his self the prize of the world by rendering it obedient.*”

Mashriqi maintained that the conflict between various religions is the outcome of sheer ignorance, petty-mindedness and a narrow outlook to life. The followers of different faiths lose sight of the pristine teachings and thus go astray.

The movement had three distinct objectives; *“to emphasize the idea of superiority of God, unity of the nation and service to mankind”*.



Khaksars in uniform Khaksars in uniform|Wikimedia Commons

All Khaksars were treated at par with each other and all the members wore the same *khaki* uniform with a red badge (*akhuwat*) on their right arm as a symbol of brotherhood. On their heads, Khaksars either wore the white handkerchief of the Arabs or the Pashtun-style turban. Also, at all times, they carried a spade or *belcha*, which was a symbol of the dignity of labour. In other words, it was meant to be used to ‘level’ society for equity and equality, and remove divisions between the rich and the poor. The movement workers were required to bear their own expenses.

The Khaksar volunteers, in their spare time, were expected to distribute motivational pamphlets and perform community service. Besides social work, they participated in a daily military parade and performed drills in playgrounds, on the streets and in neighborhoods wearing khaki uniforms with spades on their shoulders.

But there came a point when this non-violent social practices were seen as a threat by the British in India. While addressing a camp of Khaksars in Lahore in 1937, Mashriqi said things that set the tone for an organisation based on dictatorial terms.

He was to be the *Khaksar-e-Azam* (the ‘biggest Khaksar’) with an advisory council but he had the power to overrule any advice they gave.

He was entitled to remove any members from the organization while there was no procedure in place for his removal. This stance led to the Khaksar Tehrik being compared to the contemporary fascist organisation in Europe. In fact, it is also said that Mashriqi met Hitler on one of his trips and was influenced by his *Mein Kampf*.



The Khaksar flag The Khaksar flag| Wikimedia Commons

Mashriqi's closeness with freedom fighters like Saifuddin Kitchlew and Abdul Ghaffar Khan also motivated him to support self-rule in India. The rising tide against foreign domination drew young men to Khaksar in tens of thousands and they began to mobilize the masses in support of India's independence. Soon organised branches appeared in Peshawar, Sindh, the United Provinces, Bangalore, Madras, Delhi and Bengal. Step by step, the movement grew from social service to carrying out drills to military tactics to mock warfare. The British began to take notice.

On 22nd February 1940, Punjab police raided Mohammadi Steam Press (printer of the Khaksar weekly) in Lahore and confiscated copies of the *Al-Islah* along with

other printed Khaksar materials and pamphlets. In the next few days, a Press Communique (under the Defence of India Rules) was issued which banned all Khaksar activities.

To protest this, a contingent of about 300 Khaksars took out a peaceful march on the streets. They were ranged against a group of police officers led by Superintendent D Gainsford, who asked them to retreat. When the Khaksars ignored the warning and continued with their march, the police began to fire on them indiscriminately. Many men lost their lives, the street stained with their blood. Mashriqi, who was in Delhi at the time, was arrested and imprisoned in the Vellore jail in Madras Presidency without any legal proceedings. He was released two years later.

The Khaksars rendered meritorious services to famine-stricken Bengal in 1943.

Back with more rigour, Mashriqi and his Khaksars were determined to topple British rule and their contribution is significant in achieving independence. Mashriqi was also strongly opposed to the Partition of India. He felt that if Muslims and Hindus had lived peacefully together in India for centuries, they could continue to do so in a free and united India. He was convinced that this was a British plot to maintain control over the region. He reasoned that a division of India along religious lines would breed fundamentalism and extremism on both sides of the border.

In 1942, Mashriqi wrote a telegraphic message to the Presidents of the Muslim League, Congress, and the Hindu Mahasabha asking them to join hands and pledging to achieve “...*complete independence for India from the British Government within six months...*” and offering the support of “...half a million Khaksars.”

In 1945-46, Mashriqi also led an effort to put together the *Constitution of Free India*, also known as the Khaksar Constitution, in order to prevent the partition of India. It accommodated the rights of all – including Muslims, Hindus, scheduled castes, Sikhs, Jains, Parsis, Jews, Christians and Buddhists.

In fact, during the Partition riots, many Khaksars played a salutary role and saved multiple lives. Anecdotes about the Khaksar leader in Rawalpindi, Ashraf Khan, are many. He took a vow to protect whosoever was in distress, Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs. Inspired by him, an anonymous Khaksar, when pages were torn from the Quran and strewn in the area outside Rawalpindi's Gordon College, quietly collected them and put them in a well to prevent the city from erupting into violence. He also entered a local colony to calm people down but was stabbed to death.

After Partition, Khaksar Tehrik's leadership in India waned, bringing the whole organisation to an abrupt end. Mashriqi settled in Ichhra, the old headquarters of his activities and founded the Islam League in 1948. It continued to agitate and remained involved in minor civilian-political movements in Pakistan.

Mashriqi died in 1963 after a brief battle with cancer, and funeral prayers were held at the Badshahi Mosque, attended by thousands.

S Shabbir Hussain in his book *Al-Mashriqi: The Disowned Genius* aptly sums up the man, "*Mashriqi is often portrayed as a controversial figure, a religious activist, a revolutionary, and an anarchist; while at the same time he is described as a visionary, a reformer, a leader, and a scientist-philosopher who was born ahead of his time.*"

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